

PPSN: When you are practicing, uncomfortable thoughts and feelings often arise. We are accustomed to running away from these things. One way we try to escape when we're alone on the cushion is to check ourselves: "Oh, I am no good. I should not be thinking. I am a lousy Zen student." Thinking about thinking is like putting a head on top of your head. Another way of escaping is to look at and judge others. It is much more amusing than dealing with our own predicament.

Q: I saw a book named "If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him." What does this mean?

PPSN: Zen means becoming independent. That is the Buddha's teaching. Many people, however, become attached to teachers, attached to ideas, attached to words. It can be a kind of sickness. I heard a story about two friends walking down the street. One friend fell down, and the other one started to laugh. So the one who fell down said, "Look, that's not very nice. In the Bible it says that even if your enemy falls into adversity, you must not laugh, or rejoice. His friend responded, "Yes, of course I read that in the Bible, but it doesn't say anything about laughing when your friend falls down." That's a joke of course, but sadly we do attach to words, usually missing what they point at.

To be independent means that you find for yourself what the truth is. Don't just take someone's word for it, no matter how famous a person it is. If you attach to someone, you attach to someone's ideas, judgments, opinions. So if you meet the Buddha on the road you must kill him. Those are good words! However, even more importantly, when you meet your own I, my, me, kill them. Think of your life as a kind of a laboratory. You hear of a good formula. Don't accept it automatically. Test it in your life. If it really works, then use it, and teach it to others. If it doesn't, throw it out. Kill the Buddha, because you are the most important authority. That means that you must become Buddha. That means that your practicing is most important.

Q: Do you mean practicing, as you people do here in this room?

PPSN: Earlier this morning I asked you "What are you?" You were stuck, and unable to answer. That is our practice. Formal practice, which is what we do twice a day in this room, is only a technique, albeit a very important one. We can easily talk about keeping a don't know mind, but it is not always easy to actually do it. Even ten or fifteen minutes a day of formal practice can help us carry that practice into the rest of our life.

In your daily life, when you are doing something, do it one hundred percent. Then you are completely awake. If you are dreaming, wake up. Good dream or bad dream, dream of the past, the present, or the future, it does not matter. Become awake! Become an awakened one. Become Buddha. □

Longmen Grottos

The Longmen Grottos, carved from fine hard stone between 495 and 750 A. D., were once perhaps the most beautiful Buddhist site in China. Over the centuries, however, they were first defaced during Buddhist persecutions, and then looted to sell to Western museums and collectors. Now the caves remain a tourist attraction, but more than ninety percent of the images are either broken or missing.

Raining so long
a brash new waterfall bounces down
past empty niches
where sharply chiseled
slender Bodhisattvas
once meditated silently
before the swift Yi River

Raining so long
the tourists have left,
and the huge Tang Buddha
(too large to have been stolen)
sits brooding
over a wet courtyard
empty but for one single stubborn old woman
who still hopes to sell her bottles of orange soda

Raining so long
the river roars past the caves
where of all the thousand images
once carved to bring peace
to the souls of nuns, courtiers, merchants, soldiers
and to their ancestors—
now only the damaged,
the smashed, the headless
remain, slick and glistening

It may be raining
in Europe and America
where the perfect statues
sit in cases and on pedestals,
rest in changeless light and temperature,
never getting wet—
but here in Longmen
the ugly and misshapen lurk in their caves,
breathe with the wet and cold
welcome crows and sparrows
and listen to the river

Stephen Addiss